Mila KARAOGLANOVIĆ

SAVED BY THE HAND OF GOD

Mila Karaoglanović was born in Belgrade, on April 1, 1922, to father Isak Koen and mother Sarina, née Aladžem.

She lives in São Paulo in Brazil.

The war began on April 6 and my sister Sojka and her husband Riko fled to Skopje in the month of June. Riko's sister lived there, before the war she had married Dr Sima Amodaj. He was famous and much loved in Skopje because he would treat poor people without charge. Before the war broke out, the Yugoslav-German pact was annulled so, on March 27, people went out into the streets in mass protests in Belgrade. The young people were shouting "Better war than the pact – better the grave than a slave!" The Germans soon took their revenge for this by bombing Belgrade and occupying the country.

In August 1941, the Gestapo took my father to prison because he had refused to wear the yellow armband with the word "*Jude*" on it. Obviously someone denounced him. Ten days later he was shot with another 99 prisoners who they dragged out of prison. It was common

knowledge that for every German soldier killed they shot a hundred people.

The two of us were left behind, my aunt (my late mother's sister) and I. We had no contact with Sojka and Riko because, after the country broke up, Skopje went to Bulgaria, because the Bulgarian King Boris allowed German troops to pass through to attack Romania. We were living in fear and were also short of food. The men worked on the roads while we women worked as servants. I was working as well, in the German consulate. I washed dishes, and cleaned the stairs and the toilets. I would be given lunch there.

On July 29, 1941, the German occupation authorities ordered all Jewish men to report to the police at Tašmajdan. They separated out 100 of the men, put them into trucks and we never saw them again. A rumour spread that all the men would be rounded up and sent to camp. And this is exactly what happened, in September if my memory serves me. There was also a rumour that they would round up all the women and children.

My aunt had a shop in Sremska Street, near Terazije. The Germans seized this shop from her as soon as they arrived. My aunt was everywhere trying to get false documents with our photographs. Because she had been in trade for years, she had good connections. She obtained the documents, for a large sum of money. At this time we still didn't know what to do or where to go. We waited to see how the situation would develop. This was at the beginning of November, 1941. I was nineteen at the time, and my aunt was 42. One day I said to my aunt "What are we waiting for? If the Germans take us to camp that is certain death! Why don't we try to flee?" Then we made a plan. My aunt had some Jewish friends who lived in Rakovica and we made an arrangement with them to set off by train to somewhere in Serbia the following day. We didn't dare leave from the main railway station in Belgrade.

The next day, at dawn, dressed modestly and with scarves on our heads, we boarded a train for Leskovac. The German inspectors passed through and our documents passed the test. We arrived in Leskovac with just a small suitcase. To be on the safe side, we introduced ourselves as victims of a fire, from Belgrade. A bomb had fallen on our house and we had lost everything. We took the first room we found. One bed, one table. The room was damp and the winter harsh. We bought the most essential items and an electric hotplate.

We would spend most of the day in bed. One day, when we went out to buy something to eat (this was at the beginning of February), we saw a truck full of Jews and Gypsies. We discovered that they were taking them to be shot. This sight was so distressing for us that we decided to leave Leskovac immediately. We put our belongings in a small truck and went to Niš.

In Niš we rented a room with a few pieces of furniture in it. The Germans constantly made raids and inspected documents in the city. We would both put a piece of bread in our shopping bag and we had an agreement that, if they caught one of us, the other would run. But where to? In March my aunt went at least once to the railway station planning to befriend railway workers. No one could get on a train to travel to Skopje, but railway workers would come to Niš to repair carriages. When my aunt got to know a railway worker who was born in Skopje and she asked him if he knew Dr Sima Amodai, he replied, laughing: "Well, he saved my wife's life!" So, by pure coincidence, there was a connection established.

We wrote a lengthy letter to Sojka and Riko and addressed it to Dr Sima Amodaj. When Sojka read the letter and learnt that we were alive, she wept tears of joy and, with the letter in her hand, ran off to find Riko. They needed to obtain documents showing we were Bulgarian and send them to us. Everything needed to be worked out very carefully. For our part, we needed to have a safe connection that would get us from Serbia, that is from Niš, to Predejane, the first place in the territory under Bulgarian occupation. We walked all night in the dark with our guides, over terrain full of holes and overgrown by dense forest. My aunt walked with great difficulty and I was practically pulling her along. We were lucky with our guides. We had paid them well and they could have killed us, knowing that we had money, without anyone finding out anything about it. At dawn we reached Predejane and there the guides handed us over to their connection, who took us to their place to rest and eat something. Early in the morning our host loaded his oxcart with wood and set off to the market to sell it. We walked behind him dressed as village women. At the railway station he waited until the train arrived. There were about twenty of us. A Bulgarian soldier was checking the documents. When he reached us, he bowed to us and returned our documents. We didn't understand this gesture, but I told my aunt that it was probably a sign of respect for an older person.

According to the documents we were Bulgarian women and that was why he bowed to us.

The train was full of Bulgarian soldiers. I pretended to be asleep. We reached Skopje station at midnight, took a horse-drawn cab and went to the address we had been given. The city empty, the only sound was that of the horse's hooves. Sojka had sensed we would come that night. When the cab stopped outside the house she dashed into the street and there was no end to our crying and hugging. We quickly went into the house so as not to attract attention. This was April 1942.

The situation in Skopje was becoming increasingly dangerous for Jews. The pressure of the Germans was being felt, despite the fact that none of them were actually in Skopje. Jews were required to wear yellow armbands and "*Jev žilište*" was written on the doors of apartments in which Jews lived. It was clear to us that we needed to prepare for flight. As Dr Amodaj, the husband of Riko's sister, enjoyed a great reputation, he found us an Albanian who was willing to get us across to Albania for a large sum of money. When Sojka was fleeing to Skopje with her husband, my father had given her 100 pounds. The Albanian, who was born in Albania but lived in Skopje, knew all the highways and byways. He gave his solemn word to Dr Amodaj that nothing would happen to us.

Riko was afraid and hesitant about leaving, but Sojka was persistent, firmly set in her belief that salvation should be sought in flight. The Albanian dressed her as a Muslim woman. He was walking in front of us and a friend of his was at the back. We moved at night, in pitch black, over inaccessible mountains, walking over stones and through water, with no one saying a word. At dawn we arrived in Uroševac, which already belonged to Albania. They immediately took them to the *questura*. The *quaestor* knew everything and, when Sojka had rested a little, he took them to the house of a family.

Rifat returned to Skopje with Sojka's letter and so, in great secrecy, we started organising bringing the second group to be saved. This might have been in November 1942. However, in March 1943, the Germans rounded up all the Jews who happened to be in Skopje at the time and no one ever saw them again. Šukica was in this group as were some other friends of mine from Hashomer Hatzair.

In the second group that Rifat brought across, there were five of us, with two guides. We left Skopje. On the outskirts of the city we threw away our armbands and Rifat gave us Muslim costumes and veils. My

aunt was walking with great difficulty. We helped her and practically pulled her along so that she wouldn't give up. At dawn we reached Uroševac. The Albanian police were waiting for us there and they took us to the *questura*. Rifat and his friend disappeared. The most important thing was that the *quaestor* was prepared, because Sojka had befriended him. When they introduced us to the quaestor, he said that everything was all right and that he would move us in with a family.

It was an emotional reunion with Sojka. Although only two weeks had passed, it had been very dangerous for all of us because we hadn't known how far we could rely on the *quaestor's* promises. The important thing was that, as he had promised, they did not send us back to the Germans.

Mila, in mourning after her mother's death, walks with childhood friend Emil Koen, 1939

Soon after this he got us to Priština, where there were other Jewish families living as refugees. We stayed there for a while. Once about fifty Jews had gathered, we were put on a bus and taken to Kavaja.

In Kavaja we had *confino libero* status. Every person was required to report every day to the *carabinieri* and sign the register. We rented an Albanian house and began to sew. My aunt somehow managed with food and cooking and Riko did some other work. It was enough to feed us. Like the Italians, the Albanians behaved decently towards us. There were about fifteen or so Jewish refugee families in Kavaja. On Sundays, we young people would gather, sing and entertain ourselves. That's the way things were until September 1943 when Italy capitulated. The Italians from the *carabinieri* told us "Now you're free. We'll destroy all

the documents and you manage on your own, because the Germans are coming here."

We fled into the mountains, although it was dangerous there too. And Riko came down with malaria and we had to go somewhere he could find medical treatment. We took out the false documents with which we had hidden in Yugoslavia and fled to Skadar. We rented a room with a kitchen in a one-storey house, with windows overlooking the courtyard. We began to sew once again. Riko began making briefcases with a friend of his. It wasn't a problem to find the leather and the shops happily bought these briefcases. Our landlady, and everyone else we came into contact with, thought we were fire victims from Belgrade. Allegedly we had lost everything when a bomb fell on our house and we had come here to try our luck. Things were relatively peaceful until one day two Gestapo men burst into our courtyard and started shouting. Sojka saw them and quickly got into bed. They rounded us up roughly and took us to the Gestapo on suspicion that we were Jews. We were incredibly lucky to be released, only the hand of God saved us. I have never heard of anyone else ending up with the Gestapo on suspicion of being Jewish and getting out alive!

We had been denounced by Šefkija, an Albanian who was collaborating with the Germans. But he had been summoned to Tirana and this was what saved us. They interrogated each of us separately. We asked for an interpreter, even though we spoke some German, so we could prepare what we would say. At one moment one of the soldiers was telling the commander what wonderful leather briefcases Riko made. He was very interested in this and said he would call in to buy a briefcase. This convinced them that we were not Jews, because Jews aren't tradesmen: Jews are traders or bankers, or involved in other kinds of business.

When we returned home, Sojka said "If you hadn't come back I would have killed myself!" We couldn't flee straight away, we had to wait for the commander to come and buy his briefcase. Of course he came, was given it as a gift, and all was well in the end. The next day we packed our most important things. We didn't even say goodbye to the landlady, but went immediately to the other end of Skadar. Sojka and Riko rented a room, and my aunt and I took another room, far away from them. We almost never went out.

In the spring of 1944, there were less and less Germans in Skadar and they eventually disappeared altogether. We were still there when

the liberation came. We made contact with Dr Amodaj in Skopje. The Fascists had spared him and his family because they needed doctors. They had heard nothing of us and couldn't believe we had saved ourselves.

As soon as Belgrade was liberated, in October 1944, we returned from Skopje. In Belgrade we learnt that my father had been shot as one of a group of a hundred men who had been taken out of prison in August 1941.